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ABSTRACT

The recent conceptualization of organizations as "open" adaptive systems rather than "closed" systems has lead to increased interest in the relationship between the organization and its significant environmental influences. In order to study the perceived sources of internal (organizational) and external (environmental) influence on Agricultural Extension Programs, County Extension Agents throughout Kentucky were asked to complete a six-page questionnaire in which they rated the actual and ideal extent of influence exerted by eleven groups having the potential to affect their programs. Responses of 349 agriculture agents, 4-H/youth agents, and home economics agents were compared. All agents saw their respective client groups as having the most influence on their programs; county extension councils were ranked second and college administrations, third. Only agriculture agents saw research faculty as having an important influence on their program. The ideal-actual comparisons showed that 4-H and home economics agents wanted research staff to have a greater influence on their work and that all three agent groups felt the actual influence of college administrations was greater than ideal. This research has implications for several Extension policies including agent accountability and the relationship between Extension and the research activities of the Land Grant University. (JH)

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# CLIENTS, COLLEAGUES, AND COLLEGES: PERCEIVED INFLUENCES ON EXTENSION AGENTS

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ABSTRACT

CLIENTS, COLLEAGUES, AND COLLEGES: PERCEIVED INFLUENCES ON EXTENSION AGENTS

This paper focuses on the perceived sources of internal (organizational) and external (environmental) influences on the Agricultural Extension Service Agents and their county programs. Drawing on recent developments in organizational theory relating to organizational-environmental interrelationships, a questionnaire was developed asking agents to rate the relative influence various groups have and ought to have upon their programs. All agents saw their respective client groups as having the most influence upon their programs. County extension councils and college administrations were ranked second and third in importance respectively. However, only agriculture agents saw research faculty as having an important influence upon their programs. Significantly, 4-H and Home Economics agents both felt that research staff should have a greater influence upon their work than is currently the case. Policy implications are discussed.

CLIENTS, COLLEAGUES AND COLLEGES: PERCEIVED INFLUENCES ON EXTENSION AGENTS

## Introduction

During the last two decades organizational theorists have shown growing interest in organizational-environmental and interorganizational relationships (Aiken and Hage, 1968; Aldrich, 1979; Benson, 1975; Cook, 1977; Eisenstadt, 1959; Hass and Drabek, 1973; Pennings, 1976; Perrow, 1972; Schmidt and Kochan, 1977; Turk, 1977). A factor contributing to this trend includes the recent conceptualization of organizations as "open" adaptive systems rather than closed "systems" (Emery and Trist, 1965; Katz and Kahn, 1978; Thompson, 1967). Organizations as open systems not only engage in interchange with the environment but also rely on that interchange as essential to their viability. What an organization is or becomes depends in large measure on the interaction that occurs between the organization and its significant environmental sector.

A second contributing factor has been the limited guidelines provided by previous organizational research for assessing the increasingly complex, interrelated and extensive relationships among organizations. Organizational theorists are recognizing the need to address the complexity and extent of organizational relations within its environment and the factors contributing to variations in the extent of influence of institutions on organizational functions (Warren, 1967; Turk, 1970, 1977; Terreberry, 1968).

Several attempts have been made to characterize the environment of organizations more precisely and to address the theoretical and methodological difficulties. Generally four approaches have been utilized by organizational environment researchers (Katz and Kahn, 1978). One orientation has sought overall properties of the environment which apply to all organizations (Emery

and Trist, 1965; Leifer and Huber, 1977). Another approach has attempted to identify particular measurable environmental characteristics and to relate them to the organizational system. A third tack has been to focus on a single level of environmental phenomena, the relationships of the focal organization to other organizations (Adams, 1976; Aldrich, 1974; Benson, 1975; Turk, 1977; Warren, 1967). Finally there are researchers who view the major issues of environmental context as the relationship between the organization and the society or suprasystem in which it is found.

Central to each of these approaches is the question of the nature of environmental influences on the functions and goals of the organization. Eisenstadt (1959) points out that an organization "is in a power situation in which it has to cast its influence and to generate processes of power on its own and in which it is under pressure from different centers of power in the society that would control it." From its inception an organization is constantly interacting with its environment and developing ways of maintaining a dynamic equilibrium. The equilibrium results from adjustment of its own goals, structure and interests in relation to the major environmental forces. The influence processes can result in three basic outcomes: 1) maintenance of the organization's autonomy and distinctiveness; 2) extension of the organization's sphere of activities and power; and 3) subversion of the goals and activities of the organization in the interests of different groups with which it is in close interaction.

The impact of environmental forces in the development and functioning of organizations has been demonstrated in several studies. Selznick's study (1949) of the TVA found that its doctrine of grass-roots involvement and control in the recreation, forestation, and farming programs led to powerful local and national interests achieving control of the agency and sub-

verting these goals. Messinger's (1955) research on the Townsend organization showed that the changing social and political scene contributed to turning the organization from a political group to a social club. Zald's and Danton's analysis (1963) of YMCA showed how the organization survived the environmental changes and found a new mission. A final example is Perrow's work (1972) on the research efforts of a private, voluntary hospital and how they were subverted by the demands of the board of directors and other donors for publicity about the research.

Just as the environment shapes an organization in that it provides opportunities for and places limitations on its activities, so too the organization is constantly defining, creating and shaping its environment (Child, 1972; Hirsch, 1975; Perrow, 1970). While there is typically an identifiable authority structure within an organization as well as clearly defined clientele groups and environmental influences, personnel within an organization are continuously negotiating and renegotiating organizational relationships in response to changes in both the internal and external environment (Strauss, 1978; Day and Day, 1976; Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976). As a consequence, different individuals within an organization will have differential perceptions of these influences. Pennings (1973) has indicated that there are minimal correlations between objective and subjective measures even of dimensions of organizational structure. In addition, Childs (1972) has pointed out that theories stressing the importance of the environment have frequently blurred the distinction between characteristics of the environment, and the perception and evaluation of these characteristics by persons within the organization. Aldrich and Pfeffer (1976) add that this distinction may be very important among organizations that are not tightly constrained as in a very competitive market. Here it is likely that organizational actions will be determined by perceived reality, which may or may not be the same environ-

ment that the researcher perceives (Child, 1972; Weick, 1969; Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976).

This research has focused on the perceived sources of internal (organizational) and external (environmental) influences on the Agricultural Extension Service agents and their county programs. The nature of the relationship between the organization and its environment has always been problematic for the Agricultural Extension Service. In addition to internal organizational sources of influence and various external clientele pressures on the Service, there has also been the question of the role of the Federal Government. Since its establishment in 1914, the Cooperative Extension Service has received funds from the Federal Government while actively resisting any provisions which would have given the U.S. Department of Agriculture authority for directing their programs. The formal relationship stipulates that the responsibility for the actual conduct of Extension was to remain in the hands of the agricultural colleges, thereby avoiding the possibility of "forcing upon the States types or kinds of work not readily adapted to the needs of the people" (True, 1928:112).

Although there are some minor variations by state, this relationship between the Service and the Federal Government is still reflected in the form of organization of the states' Extension Services. Offices at the Federal level perform general program and administrative support functions, and act as a liaison between the Secretary of Agriculture and the states. At the state level there is an Extension director, administrative staff and a group of specialists who serve as resource persons for program development. At the county level there are usually three county agents--one each for the agriculture, youth, and home economics programs. The county positions are supported by resources from Federal, state and local sources, and each is

responsible for developing and delivering educational programs in his area of responsibility.

In developing various programs, the county agent must accommodate a variety of environmental influences with the formal organizational requirements. In the planning and development of educational programs, Extension personnel must involve the client in the planning process (McIntyre, 1970; Weeks, 1970)--a process which has been called "need-centered program planning" (Strother, 1969). Most statements regarding the model to be used in development of Extension programs include a clientele needs assessment component which involves explicit recognition of audience characteristics and needs (Duft, 1969; Leagans, 1964; Ballard, 1964). However, some organizational changes have been introduced in the Extension Service which have reduced the agent's opportunity to fulfill clientele expectations (Barnett and Louderback, 1971). The county agent is expected to communicate pertinent information to the client (from the organization as supported by the research activities of the Land Grant universities) as it becomes available (Duft, 1969). Utz reports research showing that "for programs which were concerned primarily with agricultural production, the demands of the organization (qua Extension Service) were usually given priority over conflicting demands of local people" (1965:150). For non-production programs, human resource development programs, local interests were dominant in the program development process (Utz, 1965:151). Overall, the relationship the agent has with the resources of the Land Grant university provides a stronger force for program development than local interests. Even with the limited research available on this subject, it is apparent that influences from the local community as well as from the Extension organization must be accomodated in the county agent's program development activities.

The research reported here focuses upon the differential perception of internal and external influence upon Extension Agents. The import of our findings are discussed in terms of organizational theory and the constraints on Extension.

## Methods

A self-administered six-page questionnaire was provided to virtually the entire Kentucky County Extension Staff at area meetings. A cover letter explained the purpose of the study, and assured confidentiality for the respondents. Ninety-one percent (N = 349) of the population returned the questionnaire.

Agents were asked a series of Likert-type items, in which they were asked to rate a number of potential sources of internal and external influence on their work. The scale ranged from "very little influence" to "a very great deal of influence" (1 to 5). Possible sources of internal influence included: 1) agriculture college administrators; 2) area specialists; 3) those who work in your county office as a group; 4) college research staff; 5) state specialists. Possible sources of external influence listed were: 1) county officials; 2) farmers; 3) homemakers; 4) youth; 5) county extension councils; 6) other county residents, groups, or agencies. In addition to asking agents about the actual influence various groups had upon their work, they were asked ideally how much influence those same groups should have. Finally, individual scores on each of the five sources of actual internal influence and the six sources of actual external influence, respectively, were summated to create general influence scores. These scores were then used to examine the relationship between the two types of influence.

## Results

Each agent had been asked to rate the extent of influence eleven possible

sources exert on the programs and policies of the agent. For comparative purposes, the average scores for agricultural agents, 4-H/youth agents and home economics agents respectively were computed (Figure 1). The single most important perceived source of influence for each of the three types of agents was a source external to the organization. Appropriately for each group, that source was the apparent clientele group for the agents. Agriculture agents identified farmers; home economics agents reported homemakers and 4-H/youth agents indicated youth. Interestingly, these same clientele groups were identified by the other agents as having the least amount of influence on their programs. Other relatively important sources included groups both internal and external to the organization. It was generally agreed among each group of agents that the County Extension Councils (external) as well as college administrators and colleagues (internal) were relatively influential in shaping Extension programs.

There was general consistency among the various agents regarding both the sources of influence on their respective programs as well as those groups which were relatively unimportant. Other than the specific clientele groups, the only exception appears to be the influence of research faculty. Agricultural agents perceive this group as being influential in their programs, while the other agents report research faculty as relatively unimportant. From this analysis it is clear that, from the viewpoint of the agents, there are strong sources of influence on programs which are exerted from outside the organization as well as from within.

The second part of our analysis involved the comparison of perceived actual influences with perceived ideal influences on the agents' work. Among agriculture agents (Figure 2) there appears to be a clear desire for less influence by administrators, state specialists, and county officials. In

contrast, agriculture agents feel that farmers, county Extension councils and-surprisingly-homemakers and youth should have a greater influence upon their work.

Figure 3 depicts the same relationships for home economics agents. Here we find that agents would prefer that college administrators and their designated client group-homemakers-have less influence on their work while they would prefer a great deal more influence from research staff, and somewhat more influence from youth, farmers, Extension councils, other county groups, and state specialists.

Yet a different pattern appears among 4-H agents (Figure 4). They desire significantly less influence only from college administrators and more influence from all except county officials. In particular, they appear to want more influence on their work from researchers and state and area specialists.

In general, it appears that agriculture agents see the ideal and actual as far more congruent than do either home economics or 4-H agents. However, all three types of agents agree that administrators should have less influence over their programs. This is consistent with Tannenbaum et al's (1974)findings regarding lower echelon staff in a number of other types of organizations. Moreover, it probably reflects the difference between the administrators' perspectives, which are statewide, and the special local concerns of the various county agents.

The ideal-actual comparison also suggests that college research yields less in the way of results extendable by 4-H and home economics agents than it does for agriculture agents. This is, of course, reflected in the comparative size of research budgets in these three areas in Kentucky and all other state experiment stations. On the other hand, it is not at all clear that a large increase in research budgets in these two areas would increase

extension effectiveness; indeed, social research may be simply less likely to yield extendable results than research in more technical fields.

There also appears to be a high level of agreement among the three types of agents as to the desire for a greater influence from county Extension councils. This suggests that agents would welcome these citizen bodies taking a more active role in the shaping of extension programs to local needs.

Finally, it is worthy of note that it appears that the perception of internal and external influences is not a zero sum game. That is to say, the perception of a large amount of internal influence does not mean that one perceives less external influence. Indeed, there is a positive correlation between the two influence scores: .23 for agriculture agents, .56 for home economics agents, and .62 for 4-H agents. This suggests that on the one hand some agents may be little influenced by either college administration or local client groups and as such may be (or may feel) free to establish their own program of work regardless of its congruence with client or college goals. On the other hand, some agents appear to be extremely influenced by both internal and external factors. As long as college and client goals remain essentially congruent, these agents should be able to operate quite effectively in their respective counties. However, it appears that the very structure of the situation in which extension agents are placed--ultimately responsible to a variety of organizations--leaves them vulnerable to what is potentially a highly stressful situation. Future research would do well to examine the rather complex relationship between perceived sources of influence and job satisfaction.

Implications for Extension

The results of the study reported herein may not, of course, be generalized to the 54 state Extension services and the more than twelve thousand county agents in the organization. However, these results are suggestive and deserve consideration and investigation in other situations. First, the effectiveness of Extension programs is undoubtedly affected when environmental and organizational influences conflict. Extension programs are subject presently to increased pressures for accountability at both state and national levels. However, county extension agents for agriculture, home economics and 4-H/Youth perceived the actual influence from college administrators to be greater than the ideal. This suggests that the increased efforts for accountability will not be particularly popular among these agents.

Another consideration involves the close ties of Extension to the research knowledge base of the Land Grant University. Many have argued that this relationship is what makes Extension programs effective and innovative. Nevertheless, it is possible to question the quality of this relationship with regard to non-agricultural programs in Extension. The findings of this study indicate that while agricultural agents perceive the actual and ideal influences similarly for state specialists, area specialists and research faculty, for home economics agents there is a wide discrepancy between the ideal and actual. Home economics agents and to a lesser degree 4-H/Youth agents perceive the influences from each of these sources as relatively low and considerably lower than the ideal. The choice seems clear; either increase the human development research component and the

capabilities of county agents--with full knowledge that overall effectiveness may not improve--or radically de-emphasize these program activities.

Another program related implication of this research involves the tendency of the organization to relate to the environment in a differentiated manner. It is extremely likely that county agents act in this manner with concomitant results in their county programs.[2] For example, how would one answer the question regarding which client groups Extension serves. What factors may account for the relationships actively maintained between client groups and county agents? Not even all "farmers" or all "homemakers" are alike; what influences which types are served? How can we improve relationships with all types?

Program management and administration in Extension may be improved with greater knowledge of its organization and its agents. Organizational policies must be clearly, specifically, and frequently stated especially regarding the roles of client groups and the internal organization. County agents need clarity and consistency regarding their expected performance in order to allocate priorities among programs. Extension administration has never been an easy task, and the job is considered so unique as to require staffing of top-level positions with persons who "have come up through the system." Yet, Extension rarely seems to devote attention to itself as an organization. If such were done, one might discover that many administrative actions are inappropriate to Extension. Even a cursory look suggests that Extension organization may be considerably more "modern" than most

people realize (especially with regard to the nature of the relationship between organizational levels). It appears that certain limitations on hierarchical administration exist (Pigg, Meyers, Boyce, and Abbott, 1979). Continued attempts to exercise control only exacerbate the discrepancy between ideal and actual influences and may result in a greater agent disaffection from the organization.

## FOOTNOTES

[2]Extensive data analysis relating indicators of client influence potential (e.g., percent of farmers in county) to agent perceptions, produced negligible results, lending credence to this proposition.

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Figure 1. Perceived Degree of Influence on County Extension Programs from Selected Internal and External Sources for County Extension Agents

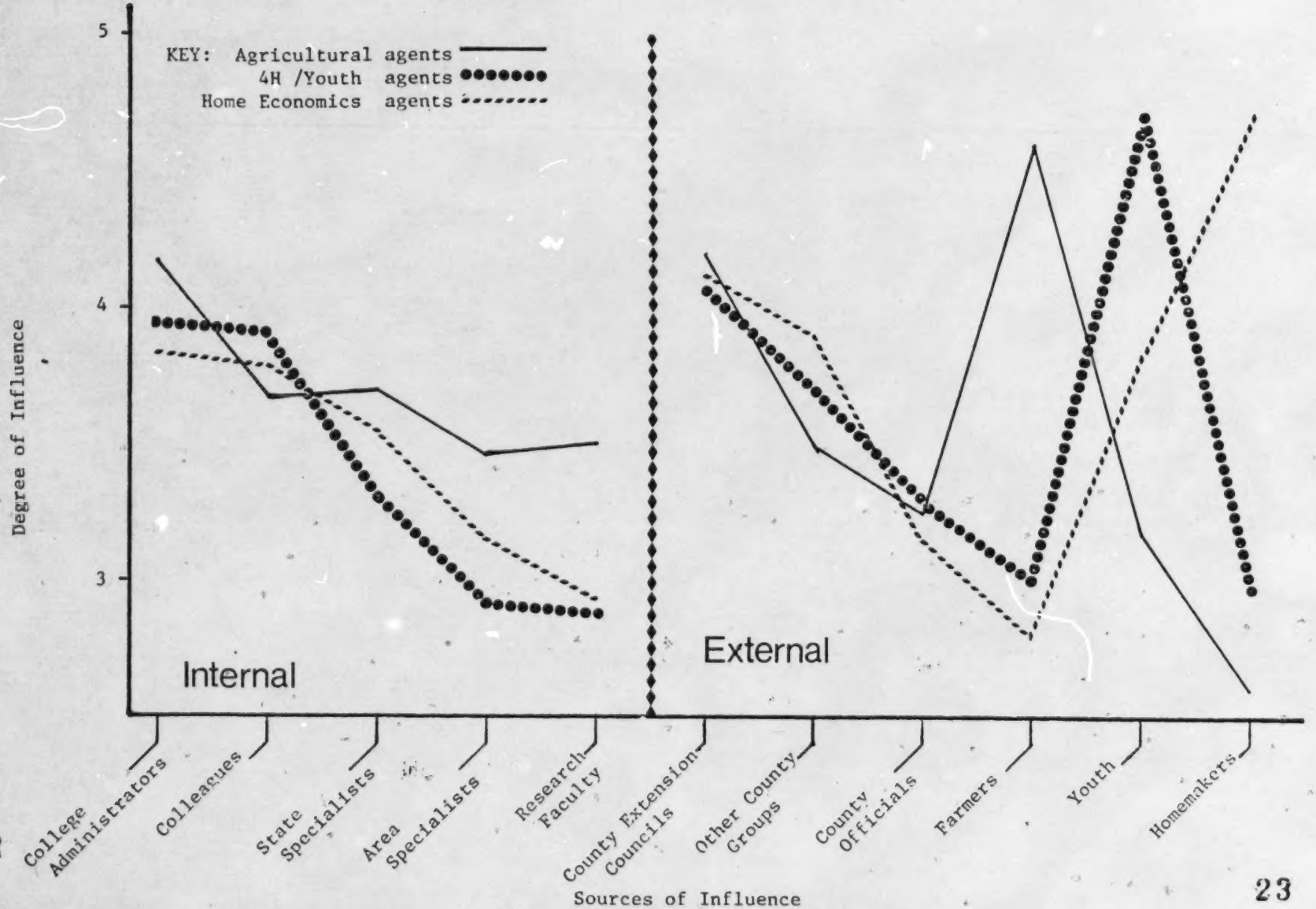

Figure 2. Actual and Ideal Influence on County Extension Programs as Perceived by County Extension Agents for Agriculture.

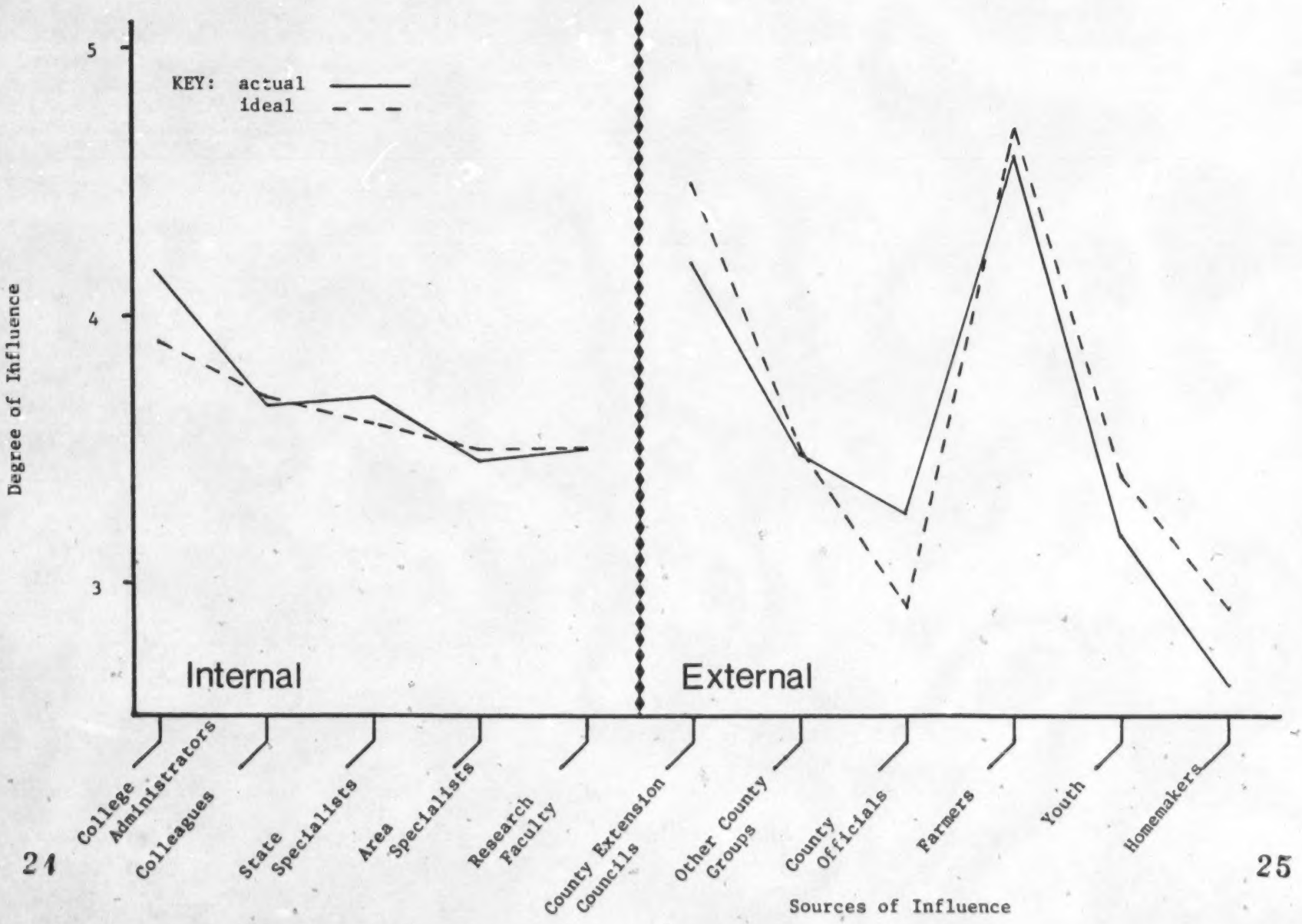

Figure 3. Actual and Ideal Influence on County Extension Programs as Perceived by County Extension Agents for Home Economics.

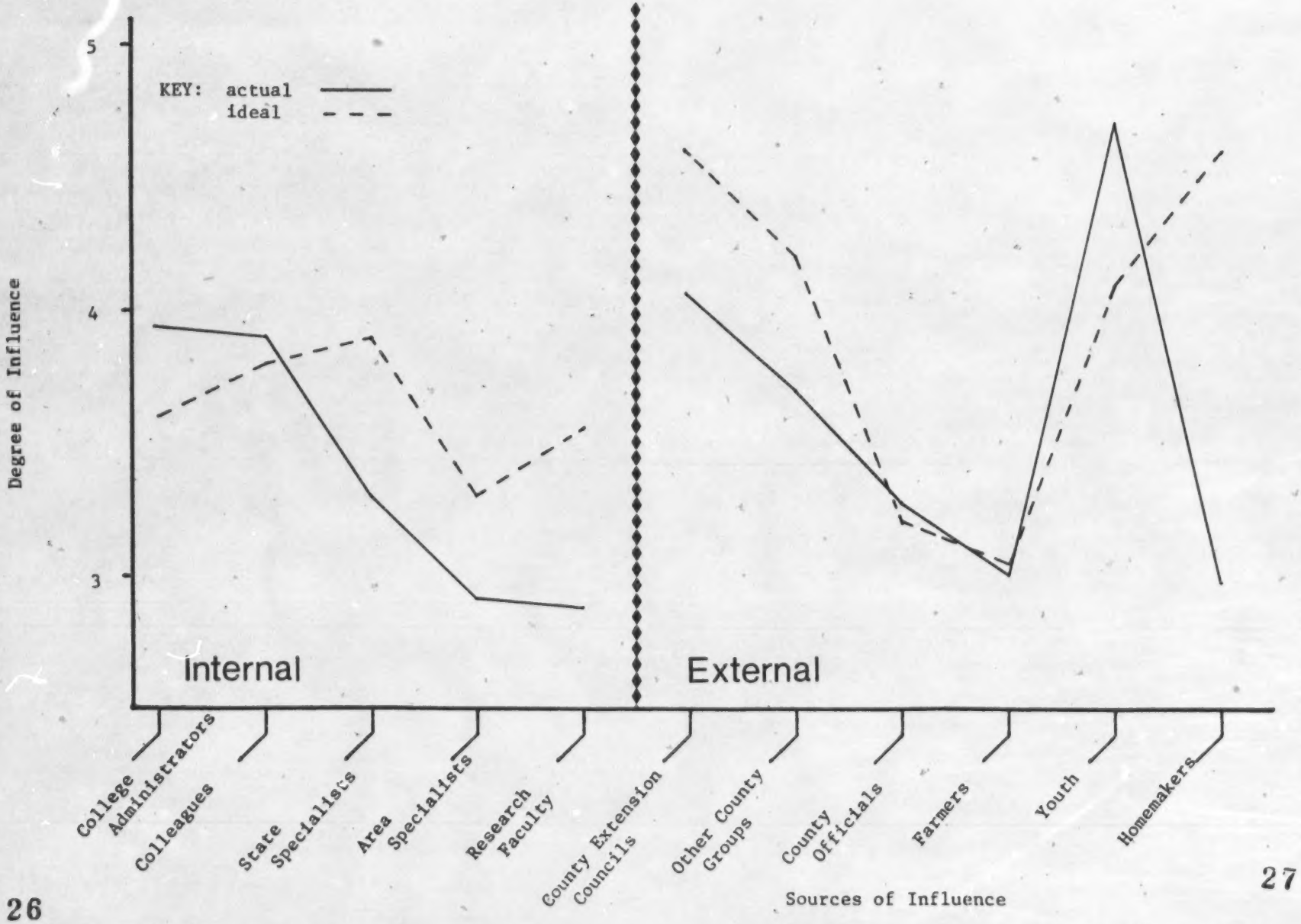

Figure 4. Actual and Ideal Influence on County Extension Programs as Perceived by County Extension Agents for 4-H/Youth